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AUTHOR Estes, Jack
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ABSTRACT

The study of popular culture in the United States is an appropriate anthropological endeavor, as evidenced in a case study of the volcanic eruption of Mt. St. Helens in Oregon. By examining its popular arts, anthropologists gain understanding of the culture and its people. For example, an analysis of reactions to the Mt. St. Helens eruption reveals the importance of symbolic rituals and tribal participation. This event triggered American entrepreneurship through the sales of souvenir items, establishment of cleaning services, and business sales commemorating the eruption. Human interest reports of people killed in the eruption have grown into legend, particularly in the case of Harry Truman, who refused to leave his home in the face of death. The behavior of nearby residents can also be analyzed. People learned how to cope with the after-effects of the incident, created a status hierarchy based on the proximity of one's home to the volcano, and established annual celebrations. The incident, therefore, illustrates people's search for wealth, control, understanding, significance, life, and community. (KC)

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Anthropology and Popular Culture: A Case Study

by

Jack Estes
Peninsula College
Port Angeles, WA 98362

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Jack Estes
Peninsula College
Port Angeles, WA 98362

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Dr. Ray Browne of Bowling Green State University in Ohio, in some respects the Grand Old Man in the field of popular culture studies in America, refers to popular culture as "the New Humanities." He sees such a study as exemplifying democracy, as showing a trust in and respect for the culture of the people themselves. On the other hand, the more traditional humanities disregard such cultural aspects as popular movies, jokes, comic books, magazine advertising, bathroom graffiti, automobile styles, fast-food restaurants, T-shirt messages, soap operas, and high school proms as gauche, as undignified, as unrefined, as base and vulgar. Anthropologists, on the contrary, have always shown a great deal of respect for a culture's artifacts, for its forms of communication, its wall decorations, its eating customs, its body coverings, and its mating habits.

A marriage between the fields of anthropology and popular culture seems natural and, in fact, it has already progressed nearly to the point of consummation. The anthropologist is recognizing the limitations of studying so-called primitive cultures and is turning more and more steadily toward contemporary American culture. In a world in which the United States is not the most popular country, the prospect of sending thousands of well-meaning scholars to all areas of the globe is disheartening. At the same time, the opportunity to study American culture from an anthropologist's perspective is exciting. The anthropologist long ago learned that the popular culture is a window of that culture, that people can't easily "pull the shades" over such a window since popular culture is pervasive: It's what is <u>seen</u> by a perceptive observer.

Furthermore, in terms of studying America, the popular culture is also a mirror of the people themselves. Not only can the anthropologist see into the culture by examining its popular arts and artifacts but also he or she can see the reflection of the people in these artifacts.

Of course, the major anthropological bugaboos persist: For example, how can the observor who is a member of the culture maintain any semblance of objectivity? Second, how can the participant-observer identify those subtle unwritten rules which are so important to the anthropologist's understanding of a people? And, finally, how can the scholar study the dominant culture without allowing his or her academic elitism to bias him or her beyond any possibility of clarity? In this form of study, however, each of these pitfalls can be circumvented by the very art of scholarship and of exchange of ideas: If we interact, if we treat the subject seriously, our blinders may eventually disappear. In exchange for showing you the mote in your eye, you will show me the log in my own.

On the other hand, the anthropologist already knows the language (always a major barrier to the understanding of a culture) and does not need to rely on either a translator or a number of years of immersion in order to pick up on the speech subtleties. Also, the participant-observor method is halfway satisfied at least since an American anthropologist is already a participant—to varying degrees--in the culture. Finally, one field of anthropology - namely, archaeology - has trained its scholars to study a culture through its material artifacts. Popular culture is loaded with material artifacts.

A look at Malinowski's sixty-year-old precept for the field of anthropology is appropriate here:

> The final goal, of which an Ethnographer should never lose sight . . . is, briefly, to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise his vision of his world. We have to study man, and we must study what concerns him most intimately, that is, the hold which life has on him. In each culture, the values are slightly different; people aspire after different aims, follow different impulses, yearn after a different form of happiness. In each culture, we find different institutions in which man pursues his life-interest, different customs by which he satisfies his aspirations, different codes of law and morality which reward his virtues or punish his defections. To study the behaviors and mentality without realizing the substance of their happiness--is, in my opinion, to miss the greatest reward which we can hope to obtain from the study of man.[1]

Is this suggestion any different, really, from Emerson's arguement about what "true knowledge" consists of? I.e.,

> The literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life, are the topics of the time. It is a great stride. It is a sign--is it not?--of new vigor when the extremities are made active when currents of warm life run into the hands and the feet. I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art, or Provencal minstrelsy; I embrace the common. I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds.[2]

One specific area of popular culture can help give this anthropology-popular culture connection particular significance: Mt. St. Helens. Through this study, one can recognize the importance of symbolic rituals, participation of a tribe, and the Anthropologist's search for meaning. American entrepreneurship has seldom been so stimulated to action as it was before, during and after the eruption. Among the items that immediately appeared on the market were books, T-shirts, magazine arts, songs, poems, glassware, ash-filled clocks, ash-filled pens, ash-filled

hour glasses, and, of course, ash-filled vials, baggies, bottles, and jars. Services appeared: the renting of binoculars, the presentation of lectures, the establishment of a cleaning service (called "Ash Kickers"), and the promotion of ash as food for pet rocks: "Just sprinkle a little on and watch your rock smile." Restaurant items became known as "Volcano Burgers," "Lava Burgers," "Nowhere Burgers," or "Inferno Dogs." In Santa Cruz, California, the Mt. St. Helens Sundae appeared on the menu of the Klein and Trumbly Ice Creamery:

> A Volcano of temptation consisting of 16 voluptuous scoops of ice cream--two each of Vanilla, Chocolate, Strawberry, Coffee, Rocky Road, Mocha Chip, Toasted Almond, & Chocolate Mint. This grand creation is then enveloped by an eruption of Strawberry, Pineapple, Blueberry, Cherry, Peach, Caramel, Marshmallow, Butterscotch, and Swiss Milk Chocolate Toppings clouded over by billowing fresh Whipped Cream, Chopped Nuts and encircled by firey Maraschino Cherries. $19.95

Stores advertised an "Ash-tonishing Sale," an "Eruption Sale--We're Blowing Our Top," a "Mt. St. Helens Survival Sale: Our Loss Is Your Gain," and an "End-of-the-World Sale." Miles from any large body of water, a realty advertised "Beach Property--Cheap!"

For the popular culture anthropologist, however, some of the other responses may be more significant about the people themselves. For example, <u>legends</u> grew. People reported stories not unlike familiar mysterious folktales about a young hitchhiker who would tell the drivers about the next eruption and who would then disappear. Another story was told of the young couple who were found dead in each others' arms three miles from their campsite, as if the force of the blast had thrown their intertwined bodies through the air to their deaths. Another tale emerged of a dying mother of four children whose husband was killed cutting wood on the mountain in order to pay her medical bills. When

her story was told over national television news, she reportedly began getting money in the mail, averaging $10,000 per day.

Of course the greatest of all legends was that of Harry Truman, holed up in his abandoned mine shaft with his nineteen cats and his supply of whisky. Truman--depicted in the Hollywood film by Art Carney--was known in reality as a mean and miserly man who hated children, but his image was much more powerful than reality. One of the big ash-entrepreneurs, Johnny Wettstein, tells of how he and a friend "Treasure their meeting with Harry Truman":

> "He gave me this undercut chip. . . It's even signed," he said, pointing to a cride "HT" scribed in one corner. "And this glass," said Wettstein, holding up a cheap, grungy, cafeteria-style drinking glass. "Harry said I could take it as a memto. . . after I drank a toast. Then he filled it with some of the worst rock-gut I ever drank. I earned that glass, believe me."3

Around Truman's replic on a commemorative silver medallion are the words "Courage--Spirit--Determination."

Another local response is in <u>behavior</u>. The nearby residents learned a disdainful type of snobbery when dealing with tourists. They became critics of each new article, each new book that appeared, picking them up in supermarkets and readily identifying their strengths or their weaknesses. They learned how to handle reporters, becoming extremely well versed in volcanology. They shared a knowledge of how to cope, recognizing when face masks should be worn or when automobile air filters needed protection.

Local residents also learned what supplies they needed, how to use panty hose for filters, how to clean ash off cars without scratching the surfaces. They developed a strong sense of hierarcy, recognizing that a person's status was somehow related to his or her nearness to the mountain when it blew. Oregonians, less than two hours (but a state border) away, were chided with bumper sticker messages: "Oregon--Get

Your Own Mountain!" A special language was developed in which tourists were called "Mountain Peepers," the confinement due to the ash fallout was called "Ash Blues," and the babies born nine months after the period of confinement (according to legend, an abnormally large number of them) were called "Ash Babies."

Likewise, as with most such events, annual celebrations grew. Parades, carnivals, dances (an "Ash Bash"), and contests of various sorts (including an ash-molding contest) were part of the first year's commemoration. The small towns near the mountain seemed to compete for the tourists as they each presented their own festivities. The town of Toutle, for example, called its celebration the Volcano Daze Festival, and one of the hits was a country-western song, "Toutle's on the Map." One verse had the words, "People used to think of us as living in the sticks,/Now they come from all around to see us Toutle hicks."[4]

The need, then, for the anthropologist, is to interpret these various responses to the experience. This was an event that cost the lives of sixty-three human beings and countless wildlife, an event that destroyed huge forests and thriving businesses, an event that wiped out people's homes, that can only be called a disaster. Why has there been such interest? Actually, it's possible to consider the interest in terms of people's searches--in various ways and for various ends.

Most obviously seems to be the search for wealth, the idea of making money from anything. Americans seem to take pride in their ability to earn money where none appears to be earned. Hence they turned the disaster into dollars, and local residents whose struggling businesses were damaged by the volcano have now been able to convert those same

establishments into tourist-attracting souvenir shops, offering guided tours--by bus, by horseback, or by helicopter--into the volcano area.

Secondly is the search for control. Before the eruption, some frustrated residents had suggested dropping a bomb into the volcano and eliminating the wait. There was a need to control Nature, to prove man's superiority. Very likely this is the role that Harry Truman played for people. He was an everyman who represented the rest of us. He did what we want to do, but won't: He spit in the eye of Nature; he laughed at death; he thumbed his nose at the government when they ordered him to evacuate; he ridiculed the scientists, claiming that "they don't know shit from apple butter"[5]; and he controlled (in a manner of speaking) the media. All those forces that so frustrate us and so demean us--Nature, death, government, science, the media--were seemingly under the power of Harry Truman. There was an American ethic of enthusiasm at work, an ethic of positive thinking. Norman Vincent Peale, Wayne Dyer, and Erner Erhard would be proud: There would be no volcano because Harry Truman believed there would be no volcano. The myth persists: We create our own reality. We control our own lives.

Third, a search for understanding seems to have played a role here. In this age of reason, we have come to expect logical answers to even the most bizarre situations. We need to see order or form in nature. Consequently, when the eruption occurred, people became intense about following the news and studying the causes and effects. Just as the Indians of the 19th Century ad legends explaining the eruptions, so did 20th century Americans look for modern legends.

A fourth reason for the responses could be a search for significance. Suddenly a human being is made to appear meaningless, and only through

a struggle can he or she lose such a condition. After the eruption, people found significance in the fact that their previously unknown town is "on the map." One local resident stated that "This is something I can tell my grandchildren aobut." [6] The ownership of ash, of a T-shirt, of a special hat all reveals a uniqueness about a person. Others ask about it, pay attention to this person.

A search for life also seems important. The ash itself can be seen as a reminder of one's aliveness. T-shirts and bumper stickers which state "I Survived Mt. St. Helens" emphasize this point. Ash-filled artifacts could even be recognized as good luck charms. And how else can one explain the humor that has prevailed? Such an abundance of jokes and humorous lines seems related to a victory of the pleasure principle, a way of dealing with fears and anxieties, a release from the repression caused by the threat. Such responses have been known as "gallows humor" and have been likened to whistling in the dark. They do provide an outlet, however; they do reveal the drive of human beings for life in the midst of death. Columnist Tom Wicker was writing about Mt. St. Helens when he said that after a while "all ash jokes begin to sound like what they are--one more instance of humankind's immemorial need to mask its vulnerability in humor and bravado."[7]

Finally, and perhaps most importantly for the anthropologist, interest in the mountain reveals a search for community. An isolated individual can become a part of a group through the sharing of an artifact. People seem to have a need to participate in the events around them. Writing poems or songs (there have been over 100 songs recorded about the mountain); buying copies of booklets, newspapers, and magazines; creating (and purchasing) artifacts all lead to a unity among the people. Suddenly all the television

shows about the eruption could be manifested in an artifact, in something tactile. Ordinarily, media have the tendency to remove people from the actual event. The souvenirs give them a path back. There is something of a global village created, and unity develops through sharing an experience, even through the suffering together. A strange jealousy grew as people outside the volcano area desired to share in what the people inside the area wanted to keep for themselves, i.e., the experinece of Mt. St. Helens.

To look at a popular culture activity such as the response to the eruption of this mountain from the point of view of someone who is interested in the motivation behind such seems to enable a person to learn about at least this one aspect of American culture. In a way, the people around the mountain could be likened to a primitive culture such as the anthropologist was used to studying. By doing so, one recognized that the varying forms of response are not necessarily base or crude or even insignificant. On the contrary, the closer one examines such elements of popular culture, the more one must realize how many potential possibilities exist. These are symbolic rituals which a tribe is participating in and the meaning of these rituals can be discerned if one takes the time to look.

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LIST OF ENDNOTES

1 Bronislaw Malinowski, Argonauts of the Western Pacific (New York: Dutton, 1922), Quoted in Fred Plog and Daniel Bates, Cultural Anthropology, 2nd ed. (New York: A.A. Knopf, Inc., 1980), p. 45.

2 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in The Portable Emerson (New York: The Viking Press, 1946), p. 43. (Originally published in 1937.)

3 Seattle P.I. (May 21, 1980), p. 45.

4 Steve Wagner, "Towns Observe Volcano Rites," Portland Oregonian (May 17, 1981), p. A1.

5 "Legends of Our Time: King of the Hill," Esquire, 94 (October, 1980), 93.

6 Jeanette Marantos, "It's Something to Tell My Kids," Wenatchee World (Rpt. in Mt. St. Helens: The First Five Days, May 21, 1980, p. 9).

7 "Day Four of the Ash Crisis," Seattle P.I. (May 25, 1980), p. B2.